

so we are safe and sorry by theatrythms

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Summary:

(Somewhere, in the heart of all this chaos, there is one thing that goes right, and that is the fact that Mike and Rich and Mikey and Richie and Michael and Richard will never be apart again.)

so we are safe and sorry

Author's Note:

jumping on that 'richie and mike are separated twins' bandwagon and here it is. yeah. its either set in 1983 or 1989, whichever really but i hope you enjoy!! title is from 'moscow' by autoheart but slightly tweaked

In blurry, fuzzy memories, Mike remembers Richie. Only back then they were Mikey and Richie Tozier, barely four years old but ripping shit up anyway, small and as fragile as any other baby, but still tough enough to withstand anything.

They're separated at five, and never see each other again. The system does a right good job of fucking everything up for them, and Mike's foster family ended up getting full custody of him while Richie went back to Maine as soon as Maggie and Wentworth were a year sober.

(That year of sobriety did nothing, and they were back drinking.)

One day on his tenth birthday, and Lucas and Dustin and Will are all over at his, he finally tells them.

"It's Richie's birthday too," he says, and Karen Wheeler makes that face she always does when someone brings up Richie or Maine or brothers. Behind closed doors Nancy tells him that she did try to bring Richie home too, but their dad said no because out of both of them, Richie was the louder one. The problem child. The one none of the foster parents wanted to talk to in case he told them to fuck off. Mikey just adapted and learnt how to stay quiet, and he wishes he'd told Richie to do the same.

One time Dustin accidentally calls him Mikey and Mike still doesn't know why he burst into tears.

"I mean, I think it's cool you have a brother." Will says, the only one who really knows anything about Richie. Mike's memories of his

birth parents are blurry and foggy, but Will's memories of Lonnie are like Mike's but completely in focus, nothing blurred or scratched or scarred. "You must miss him though."

"How do you miss someone you don't remember."

Will just bumps his shoulders, pulling a leaf from his brown hair. Castle Byers shakes with the wind but under the fort held together with rusted nails and thin tree branches there's nothing to hide from. "You could always try write to him?"

One day, Nancy and Mike pull out every phone book they own and go looking for Tozier. She also distracts mom when he goes routing through the last drawer in her vanity to find where she keeps all of the family's personal documents, looking for the birth cert of a Michael Tozier, born in Maine but raised in Indiana.

It feels like the only connection he has to him, until Nancy finds the postal address of a mister Wentworth Tozier, a dentist in a small town called Derry.

("You didn't have to help by the way." Mike tells Nancy, instead of saying thank you. He's already memorized Richie's address and thinking out what he wants to say in his head when Nancy shakes her head softly, head full of knowledge only a fourteen year old can have.

"You're my brother Mike, and I guess so is Richie, so don't forget to mention that his big sister Nancy is looking out for him too, okay?"

It brings a stinging pain to his eyes to avoid crying.)

Mike is eleven when he finally gathers the courage to send it. And Mikey is eleven when he finally hears back from his brother, two weeks later.

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Richie spends way too much time thinking about Mikey. Everyone in some way remembers him. Bill remembers first day of preschool and

running into a pair of dark haired twins, only one had bright bug eyed glasses and the other barely said anything. Stan remembers having play dates with the Tozier Twins, and admiring the way Mikey could appreciate staying inside during thunderstorms rather than going out to dance in the rain like Richie. Even Eddie remembers, but he just sees another Richie, rather than remembering the quiet, mild mannered kid that used to feed off his brother's energy, until he too, was a walking trash mouth.

In fact Mikey's absence is felt everywhere, and that's probably why his ma went off the rails. She still doesn't trust the state after they gave up her baby for adoption, because some wealthier family thought they knew what was best for him. They don't know the name of the family that took him and Richie thinks his parents didn't try hard enough. Dad couldn't give a shit, and probably can't remember what Mikey's name even was. But they talk about him more than they should.

(But Richie knows it hurt ma more than anyone else, because sometimes when she's really drunk she crosses her eyes until there's two Richie's standing in front of her, her boys, united and together as opposed to being split and apart.)

(Sometimes, when Richie isn't drunk but he's feeling sort of lonely, he stands in front of his mirror and stares at the bridge of his glasses, until there's two of him, and at least he looks less alone.)

But no one really gets it. Stan is the middle child between two daughters. Bill has Georgie, and chemotherapy destroyed any chances of Eddie having siblings.

No one gets what it's like to have a missing part. Like he's missing half of his heart, and he doesn't want to talk about it because there's plenty of people in the world with a dotted crotchet for a heartbeat.

That is until he gets a letter from a Michael Wheeler, all the way from Indiana, one fresh winter morning. It explained almost everything, and came with a polaroid of a boy with his face, only without the glasses and dressed like a respectable young man, not just in Hawaiian shirts and shorts higher than his knees.

“Please write back.” Was the last thing Mikey says, and Richie spends the next two weeks writing up a draft in between classes.

“He’s like you only...” Eddie says, holding the polaroid right up to his face, to stop it from fading in the school lights.

“Cleaner.” Stan interjects immediately.

“I’m offended at that.”

“He just lo-looks like you. Only wi-without glasses.” Ben takes the picture next, squinting at the quality.

“He looks trustworthy.” Eddie states, then looks at Richie with a slight grimace. At eleven years old Eddie is the tallest of them all, with curling hair that sticks out over his ears but he’s still losing teeth. “How come you don’t?”

“B-blame the shirts.” Bill quips.

“Stan, back me up here, I’m plenty trustworthy.”

Stan laughs instead, mainly because he’s made of something more honest than the rest of them, a little bit more carbon in his body, too much residual star dust for one person. “I trust you Richie, don’t worry.”

Despite all of this they help him write a response. It’s formal and a little forced but still manages to ooze out Richie Tozier’s best qualities, all in his neat handwriting that slopes and curves, because out of all of them, Richie has the best handwriting because he learnt cursive one day because he was bored. It’s witty and almost complicated, a quadratic letter with all of Richie’s loneliness layered over by the jokes and the quips.

He signs it with a phone number instead of his name, and calls him brother as opposed to Mikey. He sends an old school picture back, from when he’d just gotten his new pair of glasses and they look way too big for his face. It’s the one thing that makes them look different,

but Richie wouldn't have it any other way.

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When they start properly writing, Mike tells his parents it's for a pen pal program the AV club has, ways for AV club members from all over the country to talk and compare equipment. He even has Will make up a fictional person to correspond with just so there's a back up. Mike gets a letter every two weeks, and sometimes, if he's lucky, every four days. Richie has lovely handwriting too, and it makes Mike's look like a child's scribble. Richie writes novels. Great manuscripts of just words and words and words, essays on basic subjects like movies and comics and TV. Five days before Christmas, Mike pays extra to buy a thin parcel and sends him a card and a comic book, and Richie doesn't write back for three weeks.

"I felt bad that I didn't get you anything. So I just stopped. Thought you'd be mad. Sorry I'm such a bad brother."

And when the initial annoyance at the lack of a present wore off, Mike laughs it off and sneaks down to the basement, where the old, old phone is, still stuck to the wall and reads off of Richie's first letter, even though he's already memorized it.

Thankfully, Richie picks up, because Mike doesn't know how he'd react to hearing his birth mother or birth father's voice for the first time. Mike goes in and out of moods where he wonders what they did to lose him, or what he did to for them to let him go.

"Tozier house-"

"You're not a bad brother at all!" Mike says hurriedly, and tries to hang up there and then before Richie croaks over the phone.

"That's how I sound over the phone?"

Mike laughs too, because they really do sound awfully the same.

(They end up talking for two hours.)

Flash forward a year, and now they write bi-monthly and talk weekly. The night Will disappears, Mike watches his friends drive off on their bikes, only to run back to the basement and wait for Richie to pick up. He tells him everything about his campaign, and Halloween, and everything else that happened that week.

“How was Halloween?”

“Fucking lame, there wasn’t even any fireworks.” Richie swears now, like a sailor, saying stuff that would make Mike’s mom blush. He has his own phone in his bedroom so he dangles out of the window while on the phone. Mike only knows this because he can hear the streets of Derry rattling in quick bursts of sound.

“Did you go trick or treating?”

“Yeah for a bit. Me n’ Eddie and Stan went around while Bill was out with Georgie and his parents.” Over the year, Mike knows everything about Richie’s friends, and Richie knows everything about his party. He thinks Dungeons and Dragons is kinda lame but doesn’t say anything to him, and doesn’t tease him the way Troy and all those other assholes do.

“Fuck ‘em Mikey, they’re not worth it.” Richie says, when Mike gets particularly upset during his weekly update, about something Troy had said to Will. Something about his dad being a deadbeat, and for some reason it made Will really sad. “They’re just sad little virgins who pick on others because it makes them feel better.”

“Is that what Henry Bowers is like?” Richie had mentioned him a couple of times while ranting, and in response, Richie scoffs.

“Henry Bowers is the biggest virgin of them all. Just because he stuck his tongue down Beverly Marsh’s throat doesn’t make him cool or anything. Everyone knows she hated it.”

“He sounds like a real freaking idiot.”

Richie’s sharp cackle fills the phone. “You can swear in front of me Mikey, I’m not gonna run all the way to Indiana just to tell Nancy

that you know what a f-bomb is.”

Mike looks around the empty basement, tentatively, before dropping his voice to a whisper. “A real fucking idiot.”

“Mikey Wheeler! You are something else!” Richie whoops, and Mike hopes Richie’s heart feels as full as his does.

“I’ll call you next week Rich,” Mike promises. “So don’t go getting yourself killed or something like that.”

“You’d miss me too much Mikey.”

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Mikey doesn’t call that week. Or the week after. Or the week after. Richie debates calling him first, but the only time he tried to do that Mike’s mom picked up and Richie didn’t know what to say.

“It’s probably nothing.” Stan says, rocking his heels in the sand of the playground of Derry Middle School. Much like the school it’s a shithheap, rusty swings and benches littering the open space. “He’s probably busy.”

“He hasn’t even written a letter, should I be worried?”

“It co-could’ve got lost in the mail?”

Eddie snorts, in his almighty, haughty high voice. “Oh please Bill, like the US postal service would let us down-”

Stan cuts him off. “I think Richie would prefer to think that the letter got lost as opposed to his twin brother being in some kind of *horrible danger* , or even *worse* -”

But Richie really doesn’t want to think about that. “Can we please not say shit like this, you’re all freaking me out!”

“See, Richie does ha-have a h-heart.”

Richie nods, only half acknowledging Bill's joke. "Mikey's fine, probably, just busy, or... tired, I guess." He pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose and rips them off again, rubbing the frames against his ratty scarf. It's a habit he only does when he's upset, and only Stan knows.

Maybe Mikey doesn't want to talk to him again. It's probably for the Christmas present, but the reason that's sticking out against all of his other pointless and thoughtless anxieties is that Mike's parents found out and barred him from ever talking to Richie again. After all, when they adopted Mikey, they only wanted one. They didn't want the Tozier Twins and to them Richie was nothing more than excess baggage. And if he's being totally honest, he doesn't blame the Wheelers for wanting to keep their son away from him.

Stan walks him home that day and is supposed to spend the night until Richie gets a call, asking just for him.

"Richard, there's a Nancy from school on the phone for you, something about homework." His Dad hands him the phone from downstairs and without saying much else, he pushes it to his ear, leaving Stan in his room with their half finished homework.

"Hello?" A shaky, high voice says from the other line. "Is this Richie?"

He swallows thickly. "Uh yeah, speaking."

The girl exhales, almost relieved. "Hi, um, this is Nancy Wheeler, I'm Mike's older sister."

"Is he okay?!" His heart jumps to his throat, thinking of poor Mikey in trouble, or Mikey upset.

"Yeah he's fine, he asked me to call you just to tell him that."

"What happened?! Can I talk to him!?"

Nancy's voice is soft, with a slight lilt to it that makes her sound so dreamy with every word she says. "Has he mentioned his friend Will

to you before?”

Will, Mikey's best friend, small and prone to teasing. The last letter Mikey sent had been a polaroid of their Halloween costumes and it was easy enough to tell who was who. “Yeah?”

“Well, Will went... missing, for a few days, and Mike got caught up in that.” Nancy takes a deep breath. “But they found him! He's safe now, but the state is involved, and our parents are very... protective, over him, and that includes who he talks to on the phone.”

Her voice grows soft again, gentle, and Richie can tell she's good at calming people down. Richie has never had a big sister before, but it's easy to see that Nancy is a great one. “Listen, he's had a really rough couple of days, but I wouldn't worry about him. He's fine, truthfully, he just needs time and space.”

Richie nods again, mumbling against the receiver. “Time and space... got it.”

Nancy laughs lightly, like a small rush of air. “I knew you'd understand. He'll call you when he's ready, I promise.”

“Can you tell him that I'm thinking about him?” Richie blurts out, words all rushing together. “And that, I'm sorry about his friend, and I hope he feels better soon.”

“I will Richie.”

Without questioning her, Richie knows she will. She's kind like that.

“Thanks Nancy.”

When he comes back to his room, Stan has finished his work and is sitting upright against the bed, nodding his head along to the vinyl player crooning in the wardrobe. “All sorted?”

Richie thinks of Mikey and Will, and just how terrifying that must be, to lose someone so close to you. He tries to shake it off until he thinks about losing Stan, or Bill, or even Eddie, and it almost chokes

him from the inside out. He knows Stan isn't one for hugging, so instead he pats Stan's shoulder, and gets back to his history homework.

(Four months later, Georgie Denbrough goes missing, and if Will can come back, so can Georgie.)

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He fully intends to call Rich and tell him about Eleven until her powers come out. Then she becomes a secret, and he hates hiding things from his parents, but now he finds hiding things from Rich is much worse.

So instead he tells Eleven all about him, when he sees how sad she got when she asked about his family.

"I know what it's like to be taken away from your family." He says. It's the first time he's ever spoke to someone about it that's not Nancy or Will, and it makes him feel so much more exposed.

"Really?" She mutters, but her eyes never leave his.

"Yeah, I'm adopted."

"Adopted?" Eleven stutters out, and Mike mentally cringes at how dumb it is for him to act like she knows what that means.

"Yeah, it means that when I was really small, I was in one family and then got put into another." His nose scrunches for a second, something that only happens when he's talking about something that makes him uncomfortable, like health class all last year. "I have a twin brother in Maine."

"A brother?"

This brightens him right up. "Yeah! Do you wanna see a picture of him? He looks exactly like me."

In their year of correspondence, Rich has sent four pictures. A school

photo, a blurry polaroid, one picture of him and his three closest friends, and one of them as children, small and adorable, with matching grins, except Rich is wearing these huge glasses strapped to his head like a pair of goggles.

“Mike’s brother.” She says slowly, holding all the photos and looking at them individually.

“His name is Richard, but I call him Rich and he goes by Richie.”

“Rich and Mike.”

Biting his lip, he laughs. “He calls me Mikey.”

This draws a huff of breath from Eleven, something you could call a laugh, and it’s the best thing Mike has ever heard.

(And then Will comes back and Eleven goes missing, and it hurts even more. His parents take note of everyone he’s calling and everyone he’s writing to, just in case he’s off telling government secrets and breaking the law. It sucks, really, because throughout the entire time, all he could think about was his brother, and how Rich would react to everything, and how much he’d love El, and how excited she was to meet him.)

Three weeks into his phone ban, and three weeks since Will came back and El disappeared, he cracks and tells his parents.

“You’ve done what?” His father demands, where his mom just looks vaguely shocked, her glass of wine hanging limply from her hand.

“I found Richie, my twin.”

“How?” Is all his mother says, and he takes a deep, shuddering breath.

“I used my birth cert... and Nancy.”

“Nancy! Nancy helped?” Dad asks, leaning forward in his chair.

"We used the phonebooks." Nancy steps in, a good few inches taller than him but her shoulders are pushed back and taught. "His Dad's a dentist in Maine."

(Nancy doesn't specify whose dad she's talking about.)

"And he's sent me pictures of him. He's the real deal. He's my twin."

"And you've been talking? On the phone?" Mom asks tentatively. This must be the guilt Nancy talked about. Somewhere, in the darkest and brightest parts of Karen Wheeler's heart, she knows she should've fought for both of them.

Mike just nods, rubbing his hand off the back of his jeans. "And in letters?"

"How is he doing?" Mom asks, in a weird, far off voice. "He was there when we first met you. He seemed... bubbly."

"He seemed like a menace."

"For God's sake Ted he was a child!"

("So, is Holly also adopted?")

Nancy sent him a crooked smile. "Have you forgotten mom's pregnancy?"

Mike flushed, stuffing all of the phonebooks back under the shoe rack in the hall. "I just assumed-"

"They adopted you because the doctors told dad he couldn't have any more kids."

He gave her a quizzical look. "Then how did Holly come about."

"New drugs and stuff, I guess. Mom mentioned it ages ago when I was doing pregnancy in health class."

"So Holly's like, a modern medical miracle?"

“Or just the result of totally normal health practices.” Nancy snorted, throwing a pile of sheets in his direction.)

Later that night, mom sits on the end of his bed and holds his hand, warm where he just feels frozen.

“If you want,” she starts out slowly, and doesn’t really know what else to say without hurting him more. “You can bring Richie here for Winter Break, and your phone privileges back.”

She inhales deeply, as if she’ll fall apart without it. “Just don’t hide him from us.”

Mike nods solemnly, but feels, for the first time since El disappeared, a bubbling excitement, right under his skin, rushing through his veins. “Can I call him now?”

Mom even goes as far as getting the phone for him, but she sits next to him, a fresh glass of wine swirling in one hand, and stares intently at the floor as he rings up the Tozier residence.

“Rich?”

“Mikey!”

(Somewhere, in the heart of all this chaos, there is one thing that goes right, and that is the fact that Mike and Rich and Mikey and Richie and Michael and Richard will never be apart again.)

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Months drag on. Winter becomes Spring and Summer. Georgie Denbrough goes missing one wet February Sunday afternoon and is never found again.

And then more people start disappearing. When all the missing posters start popping up around town, all Richie can think about is not-dead-but-buried Will Byers, who came home, came back, in a cloud of ambiguity that Mike still won’t talk about.

But school ends, and Richie feels like he's spend the entire year crawling towards it.

In the end, he didn't go to Hawkins for winter. Something about spending Christmas with the Wheelers freaked him out, and after lengthy discussions of pros and cons and making lists with Stan he decided to stay home. It snowed that year, and the little town of Derry became swamped in snow and frost. They built a snowman the same size as Georgie and named it Chewbacca.

(No one is ever in the mood for a Star Wars marathon.)

But summer comes, finally, and with it comes clowns and sewers and Bill's stutter getting worse.

He only briefly brings it up to Mikey, and Mikey's reaction is the same as any other normal sane person's.

"Why are you hanging out in sewers?"

"We're not 'hanging out' in sewers, we're investigating."

Mikey's voice is a straight, flat line over the phone. His voice is a good octave below now, and to Richie, it's the funniest thing that's ever happened. "You're still in the sewers."

He pauses, and like the way Nancy's does, his voice becomes softer, as soft as a whisper, full of consideration and something very pure, only found in the hearts of the Wheeler siblings. "Any luck with Georgie?"

"Ah, uh, no, nothing." Richie says, defeated. They only started looking in earnest when Bill opened up his garage and showed them all his plans, his contraptions, his diagrams, his evidence, that somewhere in their old town of Derry, Georgie is just floating around, waiting for his brother to bring him home.

(Richie always feels like there's a lump in his throat when they bring up Georgie. Something about lost brothers and lost pieces and

abandoned parts of your heart being suddenly full, like you hadn't even realized you were missing something.)

"Well, you can't give up." Mikey says reassuringly. "We didn't give up and Will's back."

"Will was missing for less than a month, Georgie's been gone since February." Richie says sadly, the way all the adults in Derry act when Bill tries to get someone to listen to him. Bill is a kid, Richie sometimes forgets, with slight shoulders and a slight build, and words that shatter and crack when he speaks.

"Still," Mikey says, and it's reinforced with something brilliant "You can't give up."

"I know Mikey."

(Then Neibolt happens. Eddie breaks and arm and Stan cries and Bev, sweet Bev, who splits cigarettes with him on her old fire escape, looks scared. Ben bleeds all the way from Neibolt to Eddie's house and Bill has this odd, excited gleam in his eyes. On the way home, nose bleeding and eyes full of tears, Richie makes a plan.)

"Hey, Mike?"

"Richie?"

He wets his lips, tasting the copper running down from his nose. "Is that offer you made about winter break still standing?"

(And true to Mikey, he says yes without even hesitating.)

He tells Stan during his Bar Mitzvah afterparty. They eat cucumber sandwiches and drink grape juice on Stan's stairs.

"Indiana?"

"Just until the start of August. Then I gotta come home."

"Why are you going?" Stan asks. His hair is all slicked back, but some

of his curls are springing up from under the gel and his new, black and white yarmulke. "It's not because of."

"If Bill wants to get himself killed then that's fine by me!" Richie fumes for a second, crossing his arms over his suit and almost spilling grape juice all over Stan's old ass carpet.

"Are you gonna tell him?"

Richie flashes him a crooked smile, glasses catching in the light. "Was sorta hoping you would do it for me, old-buddy-old-pal?"

Stan shoves him a little bit, but nods anyway.

(For always and eternity, it will always be Stan who understands just a little more than anyone else does.)

He crawls through Eddie's always-open window to tell him. Poor Eds has been on house arrest since Neibolt and these late night visits are the only things tying him to the mortal plane.

"Well," Eddie says awkwardly. "I hope you have a nice time."

Richie rubs his sweaty hands on his bedspread and nods. "I'm really fucking nervous about it."

Eddie's head bounces to the side. "Really?"

"Yeah! Last time I saw him I couldn't read."

Eddie giggles against the palm of his hand. "Still can't."

Richie goes ahead and punches him right on his non-broken arm, hard. "I'll see you in three weeks jackass."

"Wait, Richie-" Eddie says, and pulls Richie into a somewhat awkward hug, his cast struck between them and rammed right in between Richie's ribs. When they pull away, Eddie's smiling brightly. "Good luck with Mike, I mean it."

(Richie smiles all the way home.)

“You’re skipping town?”

Richie groans at Bev, rolling his eyes sharply. “Just till August, and then I’ll be back to this shithole, maybe.”

He hands the cigarette back to Bev, who just nods and takes a quick inhale. These are all fleeced from her dad, and if he really had a problem with it he would’ve noticed they was disappearing sooner. “Still, Indiana, that’s a while away.” It’s only when Bev pulls out the cigarettes does Richie feel like some kid playing pretend.

“Could be worse. Could be Oregon.”

“Or Los Angeles.” Bev says, wistfully. Bev’s fire escape at 2am is the only time they get to talk, now that Richie and Bill’s vow of no speaking is well into its second week. Maybe running away to Indiana might not be the best idea, Richie thinks, taking the cigarette back from her. He takes a quick puff, tries not to cough it back up, and breathes shallowly back into the night air, the crickets clicking at the clear sky.

“Have fun in Indiana Rich, it may not be New York or LA, but at least you’re getting the fuck out of here.”

That drags a stupidly large grin from Richie.

(He doesn’t tell Bill though. Something screams ‘going too far’ about telling Bill he’s going to Indiana for three weeks. Maybe because for Richie, his missing brother came back.)

The next day, his dad drives him to the bus station and ma stays home, passed out cuddling a bottle of vodka. Dad hands him a ripped fifty dollar bill and doesn’t wait until he gets onto the bus to leave. For the next few hours, it’s just him, his walkman, and all the mixtapes he’s ever made for all his friends that he never gave to them.

As soon as he gets off the bus, he sees a kid his age sitting on the

hood of a car, banging his foot off the side of a car.

Tears come rushing to his eyes again.

“Hey Mikey!”

Mike looks up, and breaks into an identical smile, all uneven teeth and deep dimples. Exactly like him, only no glasses.

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Mike learns that life with Rich is easy to get used to. On the drive home they sit with their shoulders pushed up against each other and talk the entire way home, only Rich manages to fill up the silences Mike otherwise wouldn't know how to. He's everything Mike feels like he's missing, only with glasses that are stuck together with yellowing tape. When they burst through the door, arm in arm, Nancy and Steve are taken aback to see just how identical they actually are.

(It's just the glasses.)

“Well this is freaky,” Steve murmurs, eyes raking up the both of them. Mike's clothes are a lot newer, and Rich dresses like a dad on a holiday. “Something, paranormal happening here.”

“Hi Richie,” Nancy says instead, stepping forward and hugging him tightly, Richie's arms winding around her. “It's so nice to finally meet you.”

Richie, lost for words for once, just nods, and hugs her again.

“I figured you'd want to stay in Mike's room, so we set up the extra bed.” Mom worries her lip, brows dipped whenever she's around Rich. “But there's always the basement if you want? Micheal has a, sort of, fort, set up, if you're interested-”

“He'll stay in mine!” Mike cuts her off. No one sits in the basement any more, not since Dustin and Lucas got really into the arcade, and suddenly D&D night became trips all the way across town to pile his

pocket money together so Dustin can loose at Dig Dug.

(El's fort is resilient and still standing, and Mike can't help but make it into some elaborate metaphor that if El was really gone, the fort would crumble in on itself, like a body without a spine, or a heart without any cardiac muscle.)

But his outburst makes Rich smile, broadly, like it's the first time he's ever felt wanted.

They stay up most nights, talking nonsense. Between them, Rich is the first of them to have tried illegal stuff like alcohol, and cigarettes, but Mike's kissed a girl before, so who's *the real winner* here?

They start calling each other Wheeler and Tozier, just to piss each other off. In the second hour of being in Hawkins, Mike calls Will, Dustin and Lucas over immediately to meet him, and everyone doubts he's real.

"He looks exactly like you." Dustin cackles, freaking out more than he should, which is fair, since the only twins Dustin knows are the freaky sisters a grade below them. "Doesn't he!?"

"Welllll, we are twins after all." Rich snarks, something Mike has learnt is his first instinct when meeting anyone. "It's almost like we're bound to look alike."

When he's met with a stunned silence, he relents. "Jeez, you guys really took that harsh."

"It's probably because you're from Maine." Mike snipes, bumping his shoulder.

"So are you, dumbass." Rich retorts, and any hostility cracks.

"Hi, I'm Will." Will steps forward, hand outstretched to shake his. True to Richie's nature he licks a swipe down his palm and slaps it against Will's, making everyone in the room grimace.

"Nicetameetya, William."

“Only my grandmother calls me William.” Will almost pouts.

“Then call me granny!”

“He is... really weird.” Lucas says quietly to Mike, as they watch Rich mouth off at Keith for giving out to him about volume control in the arcade.

“Yeah,” Mike says, but he’s smiling. “He’s a weird one.”

A good weird, probably, he thinks, when Rich shakes the machine for eating his quarter.

(Someday, Mike promises, that his brother will meet Eleven and they’ll be friends.)

Two weeks go by in the corners of arcades and on the back of bikes. Richie tries to cliff dive off the side of the quarry, running around the woods next to Will’s, and falls off Nancy’s old bike trying to pull a wheelie.

(“I know it’s a girl’s bike you shit for brains! And yeah! I do like it!”)

But they’re joined at the hip, and that makes some things hard.

“Hey El,” Mike speaks lowly into the walkie talkie. Rich went up to call his friend quickly, so that gives Mike at least half a minute to talk to her. Just to say something, at least. “Rich is here, my twin brother? Do you remember him? He’s... something else all right.

“I wish you could meet him, but-”

“Who the fuck are you talking to?”

Mike drops the receiver, only to find Rich standing at the top of the stairs, an odd look on his face.

“No one.”

“No one? Jeez Mikey you gotta try harder than that?” Rich sits down in front of him, head cocked like an expecting small dog. “What’s goin’ on Mikey?”

(He knows he signed all these legal documents promising to never talk about what happened last year, but family is different. Him and Rich share identical DNA, how could he hide anything from him?)

“Do you remember that girl I told you about?”

“That girl you kissed?” Rich waggled his eyebrows, a little too suggestive for Mike’s liking. “Something beginning with E? Emily? Ella? Eleanor?”

“It was Eleanor, but we called her El, short for... Eleven.”

Rich just looks more confused.

“Do you remember when Will went missing?”

Rich nods at this, and Mike begins his story of the week he buried his best friend.

(And the entire time, Rich doesn’t look away. Or even laugh. He just listens, quiet the for the first time, his hand loosely held in Mike’s, like a lifeline.)

“And you’re still out looking for her?”

Mike’s chest falls. “I knew you’d think I was insane.”

“No! I don’t think so at all! Just...” Rich looks down at the ground, at their hands, and almost sounds ashamed. “Last thing I said to Bill was that Georgie is dead... I didn’t mean to say it, I was just scared.”

“I know Eleven’s not dead.” Mike swears, and it sounds like the same thing he says every single day since she left. “She can’t be.”

“I know, I believe you.” Rich smiles, then yawns. “Well, now that your story is over, let me tell you about the murderous clown living

in my town. Fun fact; he feeds on kids!”

Mike laughs but listens, because if his brother could sit through a forty minute explanation of an outside realm called the Upside Down, the least Mike could do was listen as he explained the room of clowns Rich got locked in, or a giant clown running out of a projector.

(It feels damn nice to talk to someone who feels just as crazy as you.)

But surely three weeks come to an end. By the time the first trees start to begin to turn brown, Rich is on the first bus back to Maine.

“Call me when El comes back, okay? You gotta promise.”

“I promise Rich, you’ll be the first one to know.”

Rich grins, and Mike mirrors it right back.

“What are you gonna do about that clown? And Bill?”

Rich smile dims a bit, which Mike has learnt, along with all his other small mannerisms, means ‘I’ll sort it out.’ “Well isn’t it obvious,” his smile grows back, until it’s blinding and beaming. “I gotta kill that motherfucking clown.”

Mike pulls him into a hug, and prays to god that he doesn’t become the next Will Byers, or the next Georgie Denbrough, or the next Eleven, gone far too soon.

“Maybe I can go to yours for winter break?”

“Nah,” Rich shakes his head. “Ma would probably, I don’t know, kidnap you, never let you leave, if you stepped foot in Maine,” Across the yard, Rich’s bus to Maine opens its doors to let a small smattering of people on, their silhouettes stretched in the early morning light. Rich grabs his bag from the hood of the car and squints intently off into the distance. “Ah fuck, there it is.”

(“If he wants he could stay.” Mom had whispered the night before. They were watching a movie, all of them, and Rich fell asleep with

his glasses falling off the side of his head and his face completely still, serene, silent. In his three weeks in Hawkins, Rich had so effortlessly and so easily integrated into the Wheeler family that it felt like he'd always been there. Even Dad liked him, called him Richard and talked about smart topics like calculus and the housing crisis.

"Only if he really wants to." Mom plucked his glasses from his face and folded them down, tucking them into the pocket of his hideous lime green and fuchsia shirt.

To break Mike's heart, Rich said no.)

Mike hugs him again, and for some reason it doesn't feel like a goodbye, even when the bus pulls out of the yard and onto the road, carrying him off home.

-

Pennywise takes one hell of a beating. Almost eats Stan's face off and practically kills Bev, but for the most part, IT's dead.

When they all climb out of the sewers, first thing they do is collapse into a huge pile of limbs and love, fumbling over each other in an act to hold onto more skin.

This might follow them everywhere, Richie thinks, and wipes at the tears pouring down his face.

(Richie forgets. And oh god does that hurt to realize. Months drip on and Eddie gets his cast off but what did it actually mean?)

All the colours bleed off the leaves and things feel okay again. Feel vaguely whole. Bill now misses Georgie and Bev like crazy, but from everything, they've gained Mike and Ben, two amazing friends. The Loser's Club misses a member but they're already planning a road trip all the way out to Portland just to see her pretty face again.

(No one remembers how they all got so close.)

(No one wants to question it.)

But through it all, through everything, there's Mikey. Distance has never felt more of a pain than the first time Richie had a bad day and wanted nothing more than to lie in the Wheeler's basement and have a good long cry. Maybe even have some of Karen's-call-me-mom-if-you-like cookies. Sit down at the foot of Nancy's bed to listen to her ramble off biology notes or practice German phrases. Play with Holly for a bit. He can't remember why he came back to Derry in the first place.

(It had something to do with Bill. And even though Bill is all fixed and new and better now, Richie still worries that someday he'll take too much on and his little shoulders will break. How can you just sit and watch that happen?)

They go a two weeks without calling again. Richie's less freaked out now, with it being the anniversary of Will's disappearance. Either they're celebrating too hard and he forgot to phone, or something really, really bad has happened, but Richie can't think about that.

Then one fresh November evening, he gets a call, moments after hanging up with Bev. His little phone rings on and off and when he picks it up, he already knows who it is.

"El's back!"

(And they talk on and on and on, about mind flayers and girls and the complications around keeping a flesh eating demon as a pet. It feels normal now, just two boys and their trauma.)

Things aren't exactly perfect. Richie's life has turned into before summer and after summer. Before finding Mikey and after. Mike details the anniversary of Will's disappearance and Richie realizes that for no one, nothing is getting better, there's just good days and bad days.

Good days are letter from Mikey, the Barren's with the guys, Bev's monthly visits and riding his bike down Main Street, wind whistling through his hair.

Bad days are nightmares, ma's drunken fits, Bill's long stretches of

silence and Eddie's frequent asthma attacks becoming frequent panic attacks.

(Nothing is perfect yet, but Richie has twenty seven years left to find that perfect world.)

"Hey Mikey?"

"Yeah Rich?"

(Chaos half-unfurled, Richie and Mike found their way back to each other, against almost all odds, all the forces of the sky pulling them together.)

"Thanks for finding me."

(As long as Mike's there, things will never be completely terrible.)

Author's Note:

thanks for reading!!! reviews are loved